DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 144 031 CS 003 683

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TITLE Developing of Collaborative Teams in High Schools Consisting of Reading Specialists and Art Specialists.
PUB DATE May 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (22nd, Miami Beach, Florida, May 2-6, 1977); See related documents CS003681-84

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Art Activities; *Art Education; Grade 10; Integrated Activities; *Integrated Curriculum; *Interdisciplinary Approach; *Reading Improvement; *Reading Instruction; Reading Programs; *Remedial Reading; Senior High Schools

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Reading Improvement Through Art (RITA) project, an interdisciplinary approach to high school reading instruction. RITA was adapted from the elementary school's Learning to Read Through the Arts and Humanities program and was used in nine New York City high schools. During the RITA project, reading and art teachers collaborated to improve the reading ability and reading skills of 500 tenth graders. The students were motivated through visual art activities to use reading as a learning tool, and their reading ability increased dramatically as they applied reading skills to learning activities. (RL)

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LEARNING TO READ THROUGH THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES
Chairing: Bernadette O'Brien, Education Director
Roosevelt Island Schools, NYC 10044

DEVELOPING OF COLLABORATIVE TEAMS IN HIGH SCHOOLS
CONSISTING OF READING SPECIALISTS AND ART SPECIALISTS
Speaker: Sylvia K. Corwin, Assistant Principal, Supervision of Art
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in nine New York City High Schools, ESEA Title III, IVC

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Collaboration

Wouldn't it be wonderful to discover something totally new?

In 1916, John Dewey said that curriculum development is "the creation of conditions for growth."[1] Sixty years have come and gone. Today, we examine a "new" curriculum: Learning to Read Through the Arts and Humanities. So, what's new? Surely not the philosophical premise: "creation of conditions for student growth" is prerequisite for this curriculum. Is the instructional methodology new? Hardly. Although we sometimes lose sight of basic learning theory in pursuit of reading skills, everyone agrees with the old-fashioned notion that children learn most readily if exposed to knowledge, concepts or skills in a sequence that proceeds from the concrete to the abstract. When we group problem readers in an art studio in order to help them to move naturally from making objects (concrete) to reading and writing symbols (abstract) we are putting an old theory into practice.

Perhaps, a new dimension lies in the fact that practitioners of the Visual Arts are addressing an audience of reading experts. But, there's little new in teams of professionals joining together, such as medical teams of surgeon, radiologist and pathologist or therapeutic teams of psychiatrist, psychologist and social worker.

In the words of a member of the Reading Improvement Through Art project team:"When I first came into the R.I.T.A. program as a reading specialist, I was quite skeptical about this interdisciplinary approach to reading and art. It took several weeks before I became truly convinced of the merits of the system. I saw students who were "turned off" to reading open their eyes in wonder as they read about the things they were creating in class. I saw students who had never opened an unassigned book ask me to recommend a book about Picasso. Formerly hostile teenagers begged me to mark their post-tests to determine how much their reading improved. Many of these students had been in reading labs 3

throughout their school careers and were bored by conventional reading materials. The materials we, the art teacher and I, prepared were more meaningful than any these youngsters had ever before encountered. Designed for and by them, describing actual processes and filling a need for information about a specific task, reading is no longer an activity in a vacuum."

Quoting another project reading specialist: "The amount of time it takes to incorporate the specific art content into lessons geared to the diagnosed skills needs of my students is great. But, with experience comes expertise. We are becoming more proficient and increasing students' growth significantly."

The success of our joint venture during the pilot year was measured in The Evaluation Report. The growth grades of five hundred tenth graders in nine high schools "were not only significantly beyond statistical expectations for each four month period, they were beyond growth normally expected in a full year's growth." [2]

Collaboration was the key. Seven years of experience gleaned from Learning to Read Through the Arts Title I programs at The Guggenheim Museum was incorporated into R.I.T.A. by Bernadette O'Brien, our Reading Consultant. The R.I.T.A. Art Consultant, Cecille Davis, contributed a wealth of experience from her pioneering at the Metropolitan Museum's Cloisters projects. Although both came from elementary and intermediate levels, they nevertheless gave secondary school personnel practical solutions to our everyday problems. Within the one parochial and eight public high schools — each very different from the other — we attracted interested "assistants": librarians, principals, student teachers, department chairmen, parents and paraprofessionals.

Collaboration

Based on the Reading Through the Arts and Humanities for elementary pupils, a Right to Read Exemplary Program, 1975, U.S. Office of Education, R.I.T.A. was adopted to attack reading problems of New York City adolescents. Funded under ESEA, Title III, school year 1975-1976, approximately five hundred tenth graders who were performing at least two grades below level were given a special sequence of studies to replace the regular art curriculum. In one required art class of twenty five students per school, reading and art teachers collaborated to improve reading and reading skills through motivation and interest in visual, non-verbal creative art workshop activities. A Reading Corner was set up in each art room. There, materials suitable to the reading needs of each student provided information about techniques, historical background and artists related to the art projects. Students maintained a written record of discussions, investigations and readings in order to develop reporting and writing skills. Art teachers, trained in the language experience approach, presented daily lessons, utilizing a large easel-mounted pad. The art teacher lettered vocabulary and facts clearly in lower-case alphabet in this journal. Utility vocabulary, lettered on cards at least 3" x 10", were posted throughout the room. Schedules were arranged so that art teacher's preparation period preceeded or followed the R.I.T.A. class. In this way, the reading specialist could devote half her visit in each school to the art teacher alone and half with the students, diagnosing reading problems and providing individual corrective work. Our budget provided two visits per week per school. Quantities of teacher-made materials resulted from the dialogue between the reading and art teachers. Once a month, in voluntary after-school curriculum-writing workshops, participants rose above "Show and Tell" sessions to produce a self-evaluation form,[3] and frequently used it to measure their effectiveness. The best lessons, 20 pairs—an art activity matched with a reading skill-are published by the New York State Education Department in the R.I.T.A. Curriculum Guide.[4]

Collaboration

From the outset it was clearly understood, that teachers would never change roles. Nor did the art teachers dilute the quality of the art experience because reading instruction was going on in the same room. Without compromise, the activities selected demanded a sophisticated level of aesthetic and manipulative competence.

The Ford Foundation reports, "In all the projects sponsored by the Ford Foundation in the 50's and 60's, the teacher was seen as the key to school improvement. The teacher's skills and attitudes were identified as the central factors in moving a school beyond the status quo." [5] Again we find nothing new. As far back as 1926, when Goodenough [6] demonstrated that children draw what they know not what they see, her research confirmed the connection between child art and cognition. By 1957, Lowenfeld [7] demonstrated the correlation between art education and the ability to accomplish tasks in other school disciplines. In the 60's, Arnheim [8] explained the phenomena of visual thinking. It was natural, then, for Debes,[9] at the First National Conference on Visual Literacy, in 1970, to hypothesize that the strengthening of "the visual vocabulary would have the consequence of strengthening the proper chances of a verbal vocabulary."

Today, in classrooms across the country, arts administrators like Don Brigham in Attleboro (Massachusetts) Public Schools are documenting how "language deficient but visual proficient school children can achieve fundamental educational objectives including, certainly, reading proficiency, if school methods are well adapted to their visual proficiencies and motivations." [10]

Together, art and reading administrators serve as catalysts in this process. We identify compatable individuals and furnish time and space environments within which they will function well. We offer direction and encouragement.

The dynamics of interpersonal relationships are complex. No less awesome are the constraints of departmental boundaries and traditional high school organizations. Despite these impediments, a mutual goal — to bring teenagers who do not respond to conventional remediation to the 8.0 reading proficiency level required for diploma certification— inspired and sustained the significant collaborative effort of art and reading specialists in the art rooms of nine New York City high schools last year.

That <u>is</u> news!

Sylvia K. Caremi

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2. Improving Visual Perceptual Skills in Art Classes in High Schools Function 09-63604 Office of Educational Evaluation, Board of Education of the City of New York 110 Livingston Street, Brooklyn, New YOrk 11201.

3. Teacher Self Evaluation Scale available from the author

4. R.I.T.A. in New York City High Schools, ESEA, Title III New York State Department of Education, Albany, New York 12324 Project Director, Sylvia K. Corwin, John F. Kennedy High School, Bronx, New York 10463

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10. Brigham, Don, unpublished paper, Prescriptive Activities to Accommodate Visual Learning Abilities of Elementary Children: Visual Arts in Learning Program, Attleboro, Mass. 02703, April, 1975.

RESOURCE MATERIALS

For Management Handbook, Teachers' Manual and sound filmstrip about Learning to Read Through the Arts write to:

Order Department
National Audiovisual
Washington, D.C. 20409

For description of NYC High School Project send large, stamped, self-addressed envelope to:
Sylvia Corwin, Assistant Principal
R.I.T.A. in N.Y.C.
John F. Kennedy High School
Bronx, New York 10463

For inclusion in R.I.T.A. research mailing list and questionnaire (NAEA sub-committee) send your name and address to:
Sarah Trotty, Creative Arts, Bldg. # 1
Purdue University
132-7 Nimitz Drive
Lafayette, Ind. 47906

To visit Learning Through the Arts Model School:
Bernadette O'Brien, Education Director
Main Street
Roosevelt Island
New York, New York 10044
212-759-5914/5

To request The Project Evaluation, write to:
Dr. Anthony Polemeni
Board of Education of the City of New YOrk
Division of Educational Evaluation
110 Livingston Street
Brooklyn, New York 11201